

BETH ANN FENNELLY

## Latching On, Falling Off

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### *I. When She Takes My Body into Her Body*

She comes to me squirming in her father's arms,  
gumming her fingers, her blanket, or rooting  
on his neck, thrashing her mouth from side to side  
to raise a nipple among his beard hairs. My shirt sprouts  
two dark eyes; for three weeks she's been outside me,  
and I cry milk to hear my baby—any baby—cry.

In the night, she smells me. From her bassinet  
she wakes with a squall, her mouth impossibly huge,  
her tongue aquiver with anger the baby book says  
she doesn't have, aquiver like the clapper of a bell.  
Her passion I wasn't prepared for, her need  
naked as a sturgeon with a rippling, red gill.

Who named this *letdown*, this tingling upswing?  
A valve twists, the thin opalescence spurts past the gate,  
then comes the hindcream to make my baby creamyfat.  
I fumble with one hand at my bra, offer the target  
of my darkened nipple, with the other hand steady  
her too-heavy head. She clamps on, the wailing ceases.

No one ever mentioned she's out for blood. I wince  
as she tugs milk from ducts all the way to my armpits.

It hurts like when an angry sister plaits your hair.  
 It hurts like that, and like that you desire it.  
 Soon, soon—I am listening—she swallows,  
 and a layer of pain kicks free like a blanket.

Tethered, my womb spasms, then, lower, something shivers.  
 Pleasure piggybacks the pain, though it, too,  
 isn't mentioned, not to the child, drunk and splayed  
 like a hobo, not to the sleeping husband, innocent beside us.  
 Let me get it right so I remember: Once, I bared my chest  
 and found an animal. Once, I was delicious.

## *II. First Night Away from Claire*

I forget to pack my breast pump,  
 a novelty not in any novelty shop  
 here at the beach, just snorkel tubes,  
 shark teeth, coconut-shell bikini tops.

*Should we drive back?* I'm near-drunk  
 from my first beer in months. We've got  
 a babysitter, a hotel room, and on the horizon  
 a meteor shower promised. We've planned  
 slow sex, sky watch, long sleep.  
 His hand feels good low on my back,  
 tracing my lizard tattoo. And he can help—  
 he's had quick sips before—so we stay,  
 rubbing tongues, butter-dripping shrimp.

Later, he tries tamely, but it's not sexy,  
 not at all—he'd need to suck a glassful  
 from each breast. The baby's so much better.  
 He rests. *It's hot*, he says, *and sweet*.  
 We're tired. We fall asleep.  
 I wake predawn from pain.

Those meteors we were too tired to watch—  
 it will be thirty years  
 before they pass this way again.

*III. After Weaning, My Breasts Resume Their Lives as Glamour Girls*

Initially hesitant, yes,  
but once called into duty,  
they never looked back.

Models-turned-spokeswomen,  
they never dreamed they'd have so much to say.  
They swelled with purpose,

mastered that underwater tongue,  
translating the baby's long-vowel cries  
and oozing their answer,

tidal, undeniable, fulfilled.  
For a year, they let the child draw forth  
that starry river, as my friend Ann has termed it—

then, it was time, stopped the flow.  
They are dry now, smaller, tidy, my nipples again  
the lighter, more fetching pink.

The bras ugly as Ace bandages,  
thick-strapped, trap-doored,  
too busy for beauty—

and the cotton pads lining them  
until damp, then yeasting in the hamper—  
all have been washed and stored away.

So I'm thinking of how,  
when World War II had ended,  
the factory-working wives

were fired, sent home  
to cook for returning soldier husbands  
when my husband enters the bedroom—

*Aren't you glad?* he asks, glad,  
watching me unwrap bras  
tissue-thin and decorative

from the tissue of my old life,  
 watching, worshipfully, the breasts resettle  
 as I fasten his red favorite-

*Aren't you glad?* He's walking  
 toward them, addressing them, it seems—  
 but, Darling, they can't answer,

poured back into their old mold,  
 muffled beneath these lovely laces,  
 relearning how it feels, seen and not heard.

#### *IV. It Was a Strange Country*

where I lived with my daughter while I fed her  
 from my body. It was a small country, an island for two,  
 and there were things we couldn't bring with us,  
 like her father. He watched from the far shore,  
 well meaning, useless. Sometimes I asked  
 for a glass of water, so he had something to give.

The weather there was overcast, volatile.  
 We were tied to the tides of whimper and milk,  
 the flotsam of spit-up, warm and clotted,  
 on my neck, my thigh. Strange: I rarely minded,  
 I liked the yogurt smell trapped beneath her chinfolks.  
 How soon her breath bloomed sweet again.

She napped, my ducts refilled  
 like veins of gold that throb though lodged in rock.  
 When she woke, we amped up our body language.  
 How many hours did she kiss one breast or the other?  
 I told her things. She tugged my bottom lip,  
 like sounds were coins beneath my fascinating tongue.

We didn't get many tourists, much news—  
 behind the closed curtains, rocking in the chair,  
 the world was a rumor all summer. All autumn.  
 All winter, in which she sickened, sucked for comfort,  
 a cord of snot between her nose, my breast.

Her small pillows of breath. We slept there, single-bodied.

Then came spring and her milk teeth and her bones  
longer in my lap, her feet dangling, and, rapt,  
she watched me eat, scholar of sandwiches and water.  
Well, I knew the signs. I held her tight, I waded out,  
I swam us away from that country, swam us back  
to my husband pacing the shore, yelling and waving,

in his man fists, baby spoons that flashed, cupping suns.  
It was a strange country that we returned to, separately—  
strange, but not for long. Soon, the milk stops  
simmering and the child forgets the mother's taste,  
so the motherland recedes on the horizon,  
a kindness—we return to it only at death.